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William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* serves as the culmination of all of the themes and narrative methods used within the writer's previous works. The novel is also one of the primary examples of his transition from just a Southern author to a great American author. Indeed, while confronting moral issues concerning the history of the South and expanding them through cultural references and various characters' subjective perspectives, Faulkner's novel becomes universally applicable and forces readers

to question their own moral capacities. By presenting a multiplicity of individual perspectives as part of the saga of the American South, Faulkner's novel emphasizes the tension between individual and collective morality and suggests that, by achieving the philosophical, sublime experience whose roots are in the Enlightenment, both the characters and the readers can reach a sense of universal, collective truth that is vital to their capacity for moral judgment.

By reinforcing a binary between the individual and the collective, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* expresses the philosophical idea of the sublime as introduced by Immanuel Kant. In "Narrating the Sublime in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Unvanquished,*" Adam Jabbur explains that while there is no evidence that Faulkner ever read Kant's theory of the sublime, these ideas were most likely passed down to him through modernist thought (9). Kant's theory of the sublime (inspired by the revived eighteenth-century interest in the topic due to the discovery of Longinus' ancient text on the sublime) asserts that within the two subliminal states, mathematical and dynamical, there is an awareness of the loftiness or grandness of an object within nature or artistic representation, which in turn leads us to feel a kind of inadequacy or fear from being overwhelmed by this object. However, we compensate for this inadequacy through our human faculties of reason and imagination, thus leading us to feel a sense of power and superiority as we reflect on our nature as moral beings. Jabbur explains that "the mind itself becomes sublime as the free play of reason and

imagination arouses our 'supersensible' faculty, allowing us to imagine something that does not exist in reality, and thus to show our superiority to it: the courage, morality, and freedom of the individual" (9). Applied to the debate over mimetic art, this concept of the sublime weaved its way into much of Romantic literature (for example, Coleridge's reconciliation of opposites and Shelley's claim about poetry's moral function); and the concept of the sublime also had social implications because of its influence on political thought, specifically the social contract theorists, whose concepts framed the U.S. Constitution. As they reach mental sublimity, individuals enter the realm of the collective, reflecting on the moral capacity of all humankind. Thus, the social contract's contending issues of individual freedom versus collective responsibility reflect Kant's notion of the sublime.

The sublime and its related ideas in social contract theory are relevant to the novel. Henry Sutpen's moral destruction, for example, is accompanied by his prioritizing personal ambition over the collective good, something Faulkner seems to suggest is present within the history of the South itself. And yet Faulkner also suggests something else within *Absalom* as he engages with both individuality and collectivity: through the reading of many perspectives comes a certain universal truth seen in all humankind. For example, Faulkner himself explained this tension in *Absalom*, claiming that "no one individual can look at truth" (qtd. in Jabbur 12). He further explained that "[i]t was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird." But the truth comes out, that

when the reader has read all these thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird, which I would like to think is the truth" (qtd. in Jabbur 13). This is also consistent with Kant's notion that, while humans contain all the same cognitive abilities, when they exercise imagination and reason and come to use their "supersensible" faculty to arouse moral judgment, their sublime experience allows them to comprehend a universal rule common to all humanity. Furthermore, this universal is a "function of subjectivity," thus making the "harmonious interplay" between individual freedom and communal agreement a necessary requirement for moral reasoning and, ultimately, the creation of meaning within life (Jabbur 12). In essence, one must experience the sublime to achieve a balance between these two contending forces, within both their understanding of artistic creations (in the novel's case, narratives) and within their capacity to make moral determinations.

Indeed, this notion of the universal, sublime experience can help explain Sutpen's moral destruction. For example, Faulkner describes the conditions surrounding Sutpen's youth, saying that "where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody," implying that before Sutpen's transformation into an immoral, destructive individual, he lived in a happier community that exercised collective responsibility. However, all this changed when his father forces the family to move: as they travel on a road of "descent," Faulkner writes about Sutpen's uncertainty of time and the passing of seasons: "whether they overtook and

passed in slow succession the seasons as they descended or whether it was the descent itself that did it and they not progressing parallel in time but descending perpendicularly through temperature and climate" (182). By highlighting the notion of timelessness and repeating the word "descent," Faulkner emphasizes the point at which Sutpen begins his moral destruction. Hence, whereas Sutpen's youthful state where land belonged to "anybody and everybody" within a collective realm expresses the sublime condition of universal morality, his family's "descent" after their relocation helps to illustrate the point at which Sutpen begins his individualization and descends into the state of immorality. His destructive prioritization of the individual over the collective is clearly evident later in the novel, as Sutpen arrives home after the Civil War and refuses to express emotional support for his family, thus sacrificing his daughter's and other children's needs in order to serve his own selfish interests. Interestingly enough, while Faulkner answered questions at a meeting of the English Club at the University of Virginia in 1957, he described the character of Sutpen: "He said, I'm going to be the one that lives in the big house, I'm going to establish a dynasty, I don't care how, and he violated all the rules or decency and honor and pity and compassion, and the fates took revenge on him" (qtd. in Karl 549). In other words, Faulkner points out the consequences of Sutpen's selfish individualism and disregard for the collective good of his immediate family and the surrounding community of Jefferson. In essence, Faulkner foregrounds Sutpen's immorality in order to emphasize the tension

between individual interests and collective responsibility when it comes to human moral capacity.

While the priority of individual interest over collective good dooms both Sutpen and his family, this thematic trend allows the story to serve as an example of the South, thus elevating the novel through a sense of sublime, universal applicability. As Frederick Karl explains, Sutpen's character seemed to be the product of Faulkner's own attempt at healing his personal problems of the past, thus serving as an aesthetically sublime experience that allowed Faulkner to exercise both reason and imagination to form his own personal truth and meaning that might be shared with readers. Yet more importantly, Karl points out that "Faulkner is exalting pride and yet demonstrating how destructive it can be; and he is revealing how that aspect of the South—and, by implication, the country—is destructive" (549). In other words, the beneficial but destructive nature of individual pride must be carefully balanced with a sense of collective responsibility, an equilibrium that Faulkner suggests that the South failed to achieve. Furthermore, by illustrating that Sutpen's selfish individualism is a destructive force, Faulkner is also revealing how the selfish nature of the South led to self-destruction instead of a greater, common good. In fact, Jabbur explains that the people of Yoknapatawpha "ostracize Sutpen in part because his difference from the community reminds them, ironically, of themselves" (12). Just as the destruction of Sutpen is the result of his disregard for the community around him, so is the destruction of the South a result of its violation of the

larger morality of the "human family." By illustrating this moral tension and some of the destructive consequences, the novel itself achieves the sublime: it becomes a "fourteenth image," a new "supersensible" faculty that unites both individual and collective interests in its universal, moral applicability.

In addition to his use of Sutpen to showcase the tension between individual interest and collective responsibility, Faulkner employs the characters of Quentin and Shreve to explore the sublime experience and the possibility of a universal morality. To begin with, according to Jabbur, Faulkner's decision to exercise authority over the text by withholding facts (a notable characteristic in most of his work) teases the reader and deprives him or her from learning about the issues of race that lie central to the novel. However, by withholding information, Faulkner also encourages his readers to achieve their own sublime experience as they exercise their "supersensible" faculties and discover a "fourteenth image" of truth. In this regard, it is Shreve who ultimately achieves a sense of the sublime while Quentin fails. Throughout the last third of the novel, Shreve seems to exercise that same harmony between imagination and reason, particularly as he ultimately exercises the "supersensible" faculty to make a moral judgment concerning the issue of race. As Jabbur points out, however, it is Quentin who silences Shreve just as he is about to tackle the topic of miscegenation. "Wait, I tell you!" cries Quentin, suggesting that he "would rather not discuss the issue that lies at the moral center of the Civil War," and

is instead stuck within his own self-experience of history and unable to think deeply about the collective faults of the South (Faulkner 222; Jabbur 25). Nevertheless, at the end of the last chapter, Shreve expresses his moral judgment by theorizing about the Jim Bonds who will one day come to spread throughout the world; Quentin, however, expresses his unwillingness to hear what Shreve has to say. Instead of acquiescing to Quentin's request, Shreve responds, "Then I'll tell you" (qtd. In Jabbur 27). While Shreve reaches a sense of moral judgment, imagining the future and climbing outside his own individual self to enter the collective realm, Quentin is stuck in the past.

Quentin's inability to reach sublimity is further reflected in his repetition of certain familiar stories, while Rosa, on the other hand, reaches the sublime through her ability to finally show compassion. While Quentin has already heard the story of Sutpen many times, as well as even encountered Henry Sutpen himself, he still feels the need to relate the story to Shreve. His excessive narrative repetition of the past reflects Freudian theory: what led Freud to the notion of the thanatos instinct was "the curious tendency he noted on the part of those suffering from severe trauma to relive the traumatic moment and to do so in various forms: in analysis, in dreams, in unconscious habits" (Hutcheon 269). Freud observed that "traumatized patients exhibited a 'compulsion to repeat' that had a drive-like quality about it, giving the appearance of some 'daemonic' force at work" (qtd. in Hutcheon 269-70). This idea makes sense considering that Quentin later resorts to suicide.

Yet what Freud's notion reveals is that Quentin considers the Sutpen story and his experience seeing Henry to be a traumatic part of his own essential self. Thus, compelled to narrate and analyze the story of Sutpen over and over again, he is so wrapped up in his own internal psyche that he is unable to make any moral judgments that model a sense of the collective, universal truth resonating in Kant's notion of the sublime. Contrary to Quentin, however, Rosa, while compulsively trapped within her almost uncontrollable rage and her hate for the Sutpen family, ultimately reaches a sense of meaning and sublimity when she returns to the home with an ambulance, intent on saving the dying Henry. This even resonates within Mr. Compson's letter, where he imagines that she is finally able to realize that the "objects of the outrage and of the commiseration also are no longer ghosts but are actual people to be actual recipients of the hatred and the pity" (Faulkner 302). Rosa is able to imagine real humans where "ghosts" used to be, thus leading her to have compassion, something that Faulkner believed was one of the core attributes of humanity. However, Quentin seems to remain within a world bordering between past and present, light and dark, and, ultimately, his own ability to find meaning through the sublime. As Jabbur explains, "[w]hat Faulkner's narrative presents is, indeed, the sublime: or, more correctly, a medium for experiencing our own sublimity even as Faulkner's might-have-beens fail to experience theirs" (18). As many of the characters fail to reconcile "personal will and public responsibility" through sublimity and moral judgment, or conceiving of what

"might-have-been," (just as Shreve conceives of the future and Rosa possibly ignites her "supersensible" faculty to imagine humans instead of ghosts), Faulkner creates art that encourages readers to transcend their own individual selves and consider the collective good.

Although Quentin's traumatic repetition of the central narrative indicates his inability to achieve the sublime, the novel reveals a few instances where Shreve and even Quentin achieve an almost sublime, collective morality through their shared aesthetic experience of storytelling. As they narrate the story in their cold, Harvard dormitory, there are times when both characters seem to unify into one, whether it is finishing one another's sentences or actually becoming indistinguishable from the text itself; moreover, Shreve especially seems to lose sight of his own individual ambitions, becoming so caught up in his curiosity about the story. As touched on previously, Sutpen's childhood, where the land belonged to "anybody and everybody," was characterized by a similar sense of collective morality, a kind of sublime state of equality and oneness between humans and the natural world. The interactions between Quentin and Shreve mirror this sense of oneness.

However, despite the fact that the act of storytelling offers temporary escape from the confines of the individual self, Faulkner makes it quite clear that Quentin ultimately fails to achieve a sense of the sublime. As Shreve offers evidence of sublimity through his moral judgments of the South and his imaginative prediction of the future, Quentin struggles to transcend his internal psyche:

> Quentin did not answer, staring at the window; then he could not tell if it was the actual window or the window's pale rectangle upon his eyelids, though after a moment it began to emerge. It began to take shape in its same curious, light, gravity-defying attitude—the once-folded sheet out of the wisteria Mississippi summer, the cigar smell, the random blowing of the fireflies. . .It was becoming quite distinct; he would be able to decipher the words soon, in a moment; even almost now, now, now. (Faulkner 301)

While it first offers a glimpse of hope, suggesting that Quentin enters a collective "oneness" with the world around him (through the window), seeing the world in a new light, the passage quickly illustrates his failure to transcend his individuality. As Quentin recognizes the familiar image of the window, he once again falls back into his internal world and becomes doomed to relive the traumatic past. Finally, after Shreve comments on how Southerners "outlive" themselves, Quentin tries hard to decipher the "words," suggesting his attempt to achieve a harmony between reason and imagination. His repetition of the word "now" illustrates his attempt to bring meaning from the past into the present; and yet, as the novel's ending reveals, he internalizes his thoughts once again by repeating that he doesn't hate the South, further emphasizing his inner conflict between the individual and the collective, between the past and the present. Quentin is hopelessly trapped within his internal world, unable to let go of his past and imagine a "fourteenth image" of universal truth. Like Sutpen, he fails to achieve

the sublime. However, Quentin is far from the obsessively selfish, individuated Sutpen: Quentin at least tries, almost desperately, to experience the sublime, lingering between the two worlds within the twilight. More importantly, his struggle in *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals more heartbreaking insight into another one of Faulkner's beloved novels: Quentin's same failure to reconcile the individual and the collective, the past and the future becomes the motivational force behind his tragic suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*.

In his Nobel Speech, Faulkner ascribes sublimity to the work of the poet: "He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice" (nobelprize.org). Just as individuals first confront the sublime with feelings of tremendous fear and inadequacy, they eventually move beyond that condition as they exercise the harmonious interplay of reason and imagination, laboring in their "workshop" to create the unimaginable through a heightened sense of human morality. As Faulkner himself seemed to point out, these "verities and truths of the heart" are what bring humans together in a universal, moral framework of both individual freedom and collective responsibility—the essence of the sublime experience. Similarly, through the aesthetic experience of literature, Faulkner encourages the reader to use both reason and imagination to achieve a "supersensible" faculty of universal, human truth.

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